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SUBJECT: MOSCOW REACTION TO TURKMENBASHI'S DEATH

Classified By: Pol M/C Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1,4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary. The Russian government reacted cautiously to Turkmenbashi's death and will send the Prime Minister and Head of the Presidential Administration to his funeral. Unofficial reactions encompassed the full range of speculations about succession, and stability in Turkmenistan. Some analysts saw opportunities for Russia, but worried about opportunities of the U.S. and others as well. End summary.

GOR Reacts Cautiously

¶2. C) Russian officials reacted cautiously to news about Niyazov's demise; some spoke about opportunities to better Russia-Turkmenistan relations. Publicly, Presidential aide Prikhodko urged a "furthering of bilateral ties", while Chairman of the Duma's Committee for International Relations Konstantin Kosachev predicted that Niyazov's successor will have to make changes in Turkmenistan's foreign and domestic policies, and would become less isolationist. Kosachev said he was certain that the Turkmen people would be "wise" enough to avoid a color revolution during the transition period.

¶3. (C) MFA Director of the Third CIS Department Maksim Peshkov told us that stability was Russia's paramount concern; the GOR was less concerned about the status of gas supplies than how the GORTX will resolve its "internal situation." The GOR has extended formal condolences from the President and the Prime Minister, and PM Fradkov and Head of the Presidential Administration Sobyanin will represent Russia at the funeral.

Two Scenarios: Stability or Struggle

¶4. (C) The Moscow Carnegie Center's Aleksey Malashenko and other experts suggested two possible scenarios:

-- Chinese Model: Niyazov will continue to be lauded and his portrait will remain in government offices while changes are slowly introduced. Most Turkmen will notice no change, as gas and electricity will continue to be subsidized.

-- Messy Power Struggle: with no heir apparent, there will be a fierce power struggle among many, including the opposition-in-exile. Malashenko said this period could resemble the post-Khrushchev period. The CIS Institute's Andrey Grozin did not rule out a military coup. He doubted that Parliament Speaker Overzgeldi Atayev who, according to the Constitution is to organize the elections while acting as interim president, is up to the task.

¶5. (C) Malashenko thought either scenario equally likely--a view that "Politika" Foundation Director Vyacheslav Nikonov

seconded. Nikonov suggested that Niyazov's successor might consider joining the Eurasian Economic Community.

Once Again, It is All About Gas

16. (C) According to Malashenko, Russia was comfortable with Niyazov because it could reach an agreement with him despite his "craftiness." Whatever happens and whoever comes next, the situation will not improve for Russia, he warned. The gas deal that Russia has with Turkmenistan involved other countries such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Any new deal will necessitate reopening negotiations with those countries as well. This, in turn, opens the possibility for other countries to insert themselves; among them China, Iran, India and the U.S.

Tragedy or Happy Event?

17. (C) Grozin predicted that the Turkmen people would be divided. For some, Niyazov's death is an occasion to celebrate and push for greater reform; for others, it is a tragedy. Oleg Orlov, head, Memorial Human Rights Center, hoped that the human rights situation in Turkmenistan will improve. Aleksandr Petrov, Human Rights Watch, was pessimistic. Niyazov's "zero legacy" meant most people will feel little nostalgia, he added.

No Time to Lose for Russia

18. (U) Several analysts picked up on the GOR theme that Turkmenbashi's death presented an opportunity to strengthen

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relations with the former republic, following Niyazov's "neutrality." Vice President of the Geopolitical Problems Academy Leonid Ivashov said that Russia should become Turkmenistan's strategic partner and help "bolster the country's defense capability." The Director of Political Research Institute Sergey Markov recommended that Russia take the lead in inviting Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Iran and India to act as mediators and immediately help their "Turkmen brothers." He even hinted at a possible Lebanon-like civil war in Turkmenistan, for which Russia should be ready.

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